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Birthing Racial Difference: conversations with my mother and others¹

Gail Lewis

I

Prologue



Read it to me again Mum, pleeeeeease, just once more. Ok, but you know you will just cry and then you won't sleep. I won't cry, I promise. Ok, but just once, then lights out.

But her sister sat still just as she had left her, leaning her head on her hand, watching the setting sun, and thinking of little Alice and all her wonderful Adventures, till she too began dreaming after a fashion, and this was her dream:

First, she dreamed of little Alice herself, and once again the tiny hands were clasped upon her knee, and the bright eager eyes were looking up at hers – she could hear the very tones of her voice [...] and [...] as she listened, or seemed to listen, the whole place around her became alive with the strange creatures [...]

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Lastly, she pictured to herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman; how she would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood: and how she would gather about her other little children, and make **their** eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago: and how she would feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days.

What was it about this ending to *Alice in Wonderland*² that made me cry? At the time I had no idea, no resources with which to attempt an interpretation. Now I think it relates to the profound psychic uncertainty I had about my mother's presence. About her ability to withstand both the external racism that became a structuring principle of her everyday once she built a life with black people *and* her own conflicted subjectivity formed as it was in the cauldron of imperial gendered desire. It was the ambiguity of that thing that, following Wilfred Bion³, the British Object Relations theorists and clinicians call maternal reverie. It is a term that conceptualises the mother/infant relation as fundamentally about communication. It speaks of the process of individuation in and through inter-subjectivity and the development of a capacity to process experience and think. At its core maternal reverie is a concept about communication – about the different ways in which 'saying' between two people occurs.

That is the first reason I start with Alice. The second is that what follows is both an engagement with my mother *and* an engagement with some of the texts which communicate ways of naming and thinking about racial difference, act as instruments of its communication, and craft pathways of proximity and belonging in contexts of racism. Whether a children's story, a scholarly text, or a small musical clip, as cultural artefacts they symbolise a double movement, simultaneously materialising social life in the meanings that condense around them whilst also having the potential to become the object cathexis across which an individual's psychic dramas are manifest. In this they are also paradoxical since in this doubleness – or performance of doubleness – there need not be any necessary mirroring between that individual's social self and her psychic truth. In the realm of the unconscious, as in the world of politics, there is no necessary belonging. So the apparent irony that the social figure of Alice, a little girl with long blonde hair, blue, blue eyes, white, white skin and

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middle-class comforts should provide the ground upon which the psychic dramas produced by my experience of being mothered were in part played out.

II

Conversations



Did you know Mum that in 1942 some bloke called Major General Arthur Arnold Bullick Dowler wrote a secret note called, '*Notes on Relations with Coloured Troops*⁴. It wasn't to be published but it warned against white women mixing with black American troops. It said:

Among the American troops in this country are a number of units whose personnel are coloured troops. Their Officers are white though there are some coloured officers. It is to...be borne in mind that they contribute a valuable service to the prosecution of the war by the provision of labour both skilled and unskilled.

Their presence in England presents a new problem to British men and women brought in contact with them. They are American citizens and there is no discrimination between the two but the racial problem is there and cannot be ignored.

It is necessary, therefore, for the British, both men and women, to realize the problem and to adjust their attitude so that it conforms to that of the white American citizen.

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[...]

While there are many coloured men of high mentality and cultural distinction, the generality are of a simple mental outlook. They work hard when they have no money and when they have money prefer to do nothing until it is gone. In short they have not the white man's ability to think and act to a plan. Their spiritual outlook is well known and their songs give a clue to their nature. They are natural psychologists in that they can size up the white man's character and can take advantage of a weakness. Too much freedom, too wide associations with white men tend to make them lose their heads and have on occasions led to civil strife.

[...]

White women should not associate with coloured men. It follows then, they should not walk out, dance, or drink with them. Do not think such action hard or unsociable. They do not expect your companionship and such relations would in the end only result in strife.

And I was thinking Mum, that when he talked about "coloured" men being "simple" and only working when they really needed to that it was like he was echoing another guy called Carlyle. Carlyle was this really important man in the nineteenth century – what they called 'a man of letters' - and he wrote a pamphlet that first he called *The Negro Question* and then he called *The Nigger Question*⁵ and in it he talked about an imagined person he called 'Quashie' sitting under a tree and waiting till the fruits fall into his lap. And he said that's why black folk needed the tutelage of white people and why we were inferior to white people. And it seems Mum that his ideas travelled down the decades into Major General Arthur's mind as he pondered the intertwining in times of war of the grand politics of international relations and the quotidian politics of sexuality and gender.

And I was also thinking Mum that his note was circulating among political and military circles about eight years before that Rickmansworth event. You had first mentioned it to me way back when you were trying to get a visa to go the States, and the form asked: had you ever been in prison. And do you remember you told me the detail about that when we were picketing Holloway Prison for the release of the Irish Women political prisoners (when was that? Was it in the late 1970s or early '80s?) – and do you remember Mum how you just broke down and sobbed.

And what was I to do, so we went home and you told me about that other day back in what, 1948 or 49? It was when you and Bill, my birth father from (then) British Guiana, went on an outing to Rickmansworth, no money, little food but very bound up in each other, travelling to the leafy suburbs with its lido and possibility of

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space to be together. Somehow Bill had managed to get the money for the train fare - (did you travel out from Baker Street – or did you pick it up from Harrow-on-the-Hill? Was this before you had been chunked out of home by your dad for having the relationship with Bill – or did that happen when you became pregnant with me?) - anyway there it was. The wallet, or was it a purse, – on the floor, waiting for you to pick it up. And of course you did, finding the notes (£1?, £5?, £10?). And though you were both aware that you had been looked at over and over again, a young black man and young white woman, obviously lovers, you somehow did not know that you had been seen picking up, and keeping, the wallet/purse. You did not know that even as you celebrated by buying a feast of a picnic the police had been called and that soon you were to be arrested and charged with theft. You told me that at the hearing all the questions put to you by the judge concerned your relationship with Bill. Where you had met him, why you had struck up an affair with him, what kind of girl did that make you given that you knew he was married. And did you even know where British Guiana was? And did you think it wise to be having an affair with a coloured man? What kind of future did it offer you? What did it say, indeed, about your character? Wasn't the theft illustration of the moral corruption that sets in when the social protocols of racial difference and the proper bounds of sexual behaviour are transgressed? And you remembered him saying, as if playing a scene in a second rate melodrama: You leave me with no option but to send you to prison for one month.



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I was born two or three years later wasn't I mum. I used to love it when you said good night to me and we'd try and outdo each other for who had the most quantity of love: love you hundreds, I love *you* thousands; well I love *you* millions; and I love *yoouu trillions*. Night, night, don't let the bed bugs bite; don't wake the moomims. Night Mum. Mum... And you'd say, 'all the things we say'. And kiss me and put the night light on and I'd listen for you next door in your and dad's bedroom.

All the things we say.

And I was thinking Mum, if after all those years you could break down at the memory of that – the court experience, and being inside Holloway - What had it done to the young, happy woman walking down a London street arm-in-arm with her friend?



How must it have shadowed our relationship, what did we say - and how. When you held me, what did you say to me, what did I imbibe at your breast, in the touch of your skin, in the depth of your eyes. Because I think Mum that so much of our relationship was choreographed through the social and familial and psychic meanings accorded to the differences in our skin.

Skin. Skin. Skin.

There has been a lot written about skin and there's this other bloke – a French psychoanalyst⁶ who has written:

When the baby is being fed and cared for, it has a third experience which is concomitant with the other two: it is held in the mother's arms and

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pressed against her body, whose warmth, smell and movements it feels; it is picked up, manipulated, rubbed, washed and caressed, all [...] amidst a flood of words and humming

The human skin presents a considerable range of differences as regards grain, colour, texture and smell. These may be narcissistically, or even socially, overvalued. They allow one to identify others as objects of attachment and love.

And I want to say, Mum, undervalued, hated and feared, but he continues:

The skin, [...] provides direct information about the external world [...] the function is reinforced by the mothering environment to the extent that it fulfils its role of 'object-presenting' for the infant.[...] Biologically, it is upon the skin that a first picture of reality is registered. Socially, an individual's membership of a social group is shown. [...] The Skin Ego is the original parchment which preserves, like a palimpsest, the erased, scratched-out, written-over first outlines of an 'original' pre-verbal writing made up of traces upon the skin.

Oh what we could tell him, eh Mum about the skin's language and social valorisation, about its invisible traces. About how as well as fostering feelings of hatred and fear and curiosity, it can expose your transgressive erotic desires and your claims for autonomy in a gendered regime that failed to recognise any such autonomy. About the continuous birthing of racial difference and the ruptures that skin can cause between mother and daughter – about what the skins “considerable range of differences” can speak.

I mean we know it can speak secrets and desire and knowledge, the underside, or maybe Mum with full awareness of the over-determined character of its use here, I can call it the dark side, the dark side of love and desire and erotic bodily contact. How much you learned from this aspect of the language of skin, eh Mum. How the experience of the skin's social language became a generative force and honed in you an emotional sensibility as to the costs of socially illicit sexual desire. Like when Peter Tatchell, an out gay man, tried to stand as the Labour Party candidate in Bermondsey in 1981. And you would say in a tone that spoke recognition and grief: “They'll crucify him, they'll crucify him” as tears welled-up in your eyes as much for the echo of that other kind of socially illegitimate love and desire as for his. Sex and skin. Skin and sex.

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And it's so difficult because it can also speak connection and togetherness as well as distance and despair, can't it Mum. And there can be so many prompts for it, can't there. Sometimes it is other people. Like that time in the late '50s when I had to leave Nan's and start at another school in Kilburn (near Notting Hill). Do you remember you were taking me to school – *Carlton Vale infants* – and as we turned the corner into Carlton Vale (the street) the sound of 'nigger' and 'nigger-lover' rang out and smashed us in the face, then pierced us in the back as we moved passed the teenage boys who were yelling at us. You gripped my hand tight then, pulling me closer to your side and shouted something back and inside my stomach I felt what in an adult voice I might have called your simultaneous anger, defiance and anguish. At the time it was just a child's stomach ache.

What did we expect from the school? I mean you had deliberately tried to avoid me going to school in Kilburn where we lived because there was so much racial tension. And schools were such intense zones in which the struggle over a black and Asian presence was being played out.



I mean it would only be about five or six years later that the Government of the time introduced a policy of bussing into certain areas. Did you know that, Mum: most people think that it only happened in the US? It was around the time of Dad's birthday and a little after Rita, your sister, emigrated to the USA. So it was in 1963 that Sir Edward Boyle, the then Minister of Education, said in the House of Commons⁷:

I think that perhaps especially in the week of President Kennedy's death I must at the start state to the House my own belief that the problem of

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racial relations, and of integration versus segregation, will continue for generations to be one of the most important facing the free world...The school is, therefore, of great importance as the obvious instrument for achieving integration. [and] ...it is my own hope that schools will not become segregated...I am sure that is wrong for two reasons.

In the first place, in the interests of the general policy for racial integration, it is my view that efforts must be made to prevent individual schools from becoming only immigrant schools. Secondly, there is the educational point of which we must not lose sight. If possible, it is desirable on educational grounds that no one school should have more than 30 per cent of immigrants. I am sure that the educational problems that one gets above the level of 30 per cent immigrant children become infinitely harder and perhaps impossible to tackle.

And I was an 'immigrant' child in that view wasn't I Mum, because they meant black children, and Asian children, it wasn't about where you were born or what your passport would be, if you had one. But in the school you were taking me to I was the only black child – and yet still there were problems.

What did all that stuff at the level of the state mean for us – for Major General Arthur Arnold and Sir Edward – surely circled us. But there was more, wasn't there. I mean it wasn't just the state and its representative voices that created moments of racial distance and despair.

I mean you never really stopped telling me about how you never stopped paying for having me and Lorraine, your black children. Were you echoing Major General Arthur Arnold Bullick Dowler, and saying that such relations would only end in strife? I know I was for so long sure that I had ruined your life. And even now Mum, every now and then, I am still consumed with a sense of the truth of that.

III

Ambivalence

So I guess what I'm saying Mum is that their circling penetrated our life-world: entered my psyche and I think in part gave contours and content to your maternal ambivalence. And Mum, the impact of a mother's relationships – with partners, family, friends – and her social experiences do produce an ambivalence in her toward her children. Rozsika Parker has shown us this and forgive me Mum if I get a bit

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academic for a moment but she found out that when a new baby arrives it can impact on a couple in really deep ways, leaving them feeling alone and overburdened. And she says that in “such circumstances, the element of hatred in a mother’s feelings towards her baby can become huge, almost drowning out love”⁸. I think this is exactly how you felt about me isn’t it Mum.

Sometimes.

I mean when you had to gather up your inner strength so as to be prepared for another sneer, another comment, yet another demonstration of what people known to you or not, thought of you and your black children, thought of you for *having* black children. How your father and brother claimed you brought shame and disgrace on the family, on them.



How others cast you as sexually depraved and morally bankrupt. How your ability to be a good enough mother was called into doubt, called into doubt because otherwise wouldn’t you have stopped to think about how hard it would be for the ‘half-caste’⁹ children you were to bear who wouldn’t know which world they belonged to. I think then, in those moments maybe it was the hatred side of your ambivalence that took hold. And then again, when Dad was awful to you and less

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than a good enough father and worse as a husband, what then Mum: did he and I become merged as of the same skin?

And you know what Mum, you would not have been alone if that had happened. I mean we are coming to know of other stories that show you were not alone in your responses to race and racism, not singular in your movement back and forth, in and out of the emotional economies of whiteness and the habits of thinking that it sometimes generates. For example Mum, and what I am going to tell you now is just incredible: but in the USA this year there is this black man called Barack Obama and he was nominated as the Democratic Party candidate for President-of-the-United-States-of-America – you know how they say it as if it is all one word! And can you imagine this man who is all mixed up like our family but who is a black man as I am a black woman, well he said maybe I can, maybe I can become President of the USA. It all depended of course – all depended on the outcome of their general election but can you imagine Mum that thirty-three years after we sat and watched that other African-American man, Arthur Ashe, come out onto the leafy lawns of oh so white and middle-class and English Wimbledon and win the men's singles final, that a black man did become the President-of-the-United States of America!!



It reminded me Mum of that day when we were all jumping up and singing James Brown's *Say it Loud: Black and I'm Proud*. Do you remember, Mum, that day when we were all at Betty's house – in North Harrow or was it Rayner's Lane? – anyway, we were there with Mike, the man you loved so much and who loved you,

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and Ffyfa was there too, with her daughter and there were Betty's children, including her son Daryll, who was about the same age as me, and Pete too I think but I don't remember who else.

But we were about 12 or 13 and the house was full and rocking. Betty's husband - what *was* his name? - was still out, maybe still at the base, so were some of the other guys and women who generally hung out with that crowd. It was when the USA still officially had air force bases in England and most of the people we knew were stationed at the one in Ruislip – I heard that they closed it down in the mid-to-late 80's but there was also rumour that that airfield has been used as part of what they call 'extraordinary rendition'. Now Mum, it's all to do with the War on Iraq that President Bush and Prime Minister Blair launched after some people brought the World Trade Centre towers down, but I'm not so much thinking about that as that day back in 1968. 40 years ago Mum, 40 years. We were at Betty's and it was the Olympics. All of us black except you.

We'd watched the race, the men's 200 metres final. "And the gun goes off: yes, run boy, run. Look at him go!! Oh yes, come on brother Tommy, come on brother John. Yes, yes, ah daaamn, the white boy just took second from John. But wow gold and bronze going 'back to the world'". High fives all round. When it came to the medal ceremony, do you remember Mum, we all took our plates of food – chicken, macaroni and cheese, corn bread, cabbage salad, greens and potatoes. Cokes, that strange, new to us, drink root beer plus regular beer. There was always so much food at Betty's – and it was a bit like our food, I mean West Indian food in that there were similar ingredients and the way we ate was similar but it was different too – they had pork but no jerk, sweet potato but they were not white, chicken but no rice and peas, collard greens but no callaloo or bread fruit, that kind of thing.

We loved it didn't we, Mum. They seemed pretty well provided for didn't they – and going round the PX on the base was such a surprise the first few times, so many items, so much food, all so cheap. But the material possessions hid a mountain of stuff didn't it Mum – especially the costs to them all, the women as much as the men, of the fact that all the men had served in 'Nam, some, like Mike, three times – they were pretty messed up weren't they. And still they talked about the US-of-A as

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‘the world’. That was something I could never quite get my head around. What did they mean? Strange.

But I’m losing track. As I said, what I was thinking about Mum was that day at Betty’s. The medal ceremony starts and we all have one eye on the t.v. so as to be sure we catch it. We see the men standing at the sides of the individual podiums: What way do they go? From gold to bronze or the other way round? Whichever way the gold medal winner stands in the middle and so that was Tommy. Anyway when they are all on their podiums and the US anthem is playing – we see the fists rise up, as if in slow motion, not a hand across the chest or both hands by their sides but two black hands above two slightly bowed heads and two white hands held down by the guy’s side. And as though co-ordinated by some invisible force, as each of us saw that symbol and felt its power, we jumped up, as if one, and as our fists rose above our heads – all 12 -13 of us – and yelled, “yes! Black Power, Black Power”, as we leapt to our feet and the floorboards of Betty’s suburban semi- trembled under the weight of our energy, our pride, our delight.

You were with us – or more like you were with that white boy from Australia, or was it New Zealand? - who acted in solidarity with Tommy and John by refusing to salute and wearing a badge showing his support for them.

“Uh, wit’ your bad self, and say it loud I’m black and I’m proud”.

And we did and we were. You saw that Mum didn’t you and laughed and cheered.

But it was far more complicated than simple gestures of solidarity – I mean, as I’ve been saying, in the confines of intimate life – it was far more messy and ambivalent, wasn’t it Mum. I mean we all were together, and you and Paula and Pauline and Pat, all of you had black children and had been sharing your lives with black folk for at least twenty years by that time hadn’t you?

So it wasn’t about separation, was it Mum. I mean you – we, were all living together but it didn’t mean that all racial cleavage and antagonism disappeared from our lives, did it. And I don’t mean just antagonisms that came from outside like when we were petrol bombed in the middle of the Notting Hill Riots in 1958/9 when white ‘Teddy boys’ had attacked black people in and around that area and Kelso Cochrane had been murdered by racists.

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It's almost 40 years since that day at Betty's, Mum, 60 if you count when you and Pauline went into the *Paramount* club on Tottenham Court Road and saw a dance floor full of black people enjoying themselves – a black club was a thing almost unheard of then, wasn't it Mum. And there you met Andre and Bill.

Now I've really gone off the point because I was saying that you wouldn't be alone, wasn't I. I wanted to tell you that this guy Obama, the one who has become the first black American man - or woman - to be president of the US, well he says many things but I think you will recognise this one tiny part of a recent speech he made, because in it he speaks something of our truth Mum, our painful truth. He's talking about his connection to the Reverend of his church in Chicago. This reverend has said controversial things about why those people might have brought down the World Trade Centre towers, and Obama marks a difference between staying connected to someone whom you respect and love and agreeing with all that that someone says and thinks, and he's talking about his grandmother and says:

I can no more disown him than I can my white grandmother – a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe¹⁰.

We know that don't we? I mean we have some stories to tell about that kind of thing, that proximity of love and racism, the simultaneous closeness and distance, the us-ing and them-ing inside the family. And I think stories like ours – like Obama's - need telling. Because I was reading some stuff that a black woman psychoanalyst from the USA called Kathleen Pogue White¹¹ has written about surviving hate and being hated and she was saying that she thinks that we all have our hate stories to tell but that there is a taboo about doing so¹². And mostly she's thinking and writing about racial hatred though she knows that hatred takes many forms. And Mum she recounts a story from one of the black women she saw as a patient, a black woman called Marsha and who had a white mother and a black father, a woman who was very successful in her working life but somehow is lonely and unhappy and who describes herself as "a typical evil nigger bitch"¹³. Anyway this woman patient thought that her mother had died when she was a baby and that this was the cause of the fact that she was inconsolable as a baby. But through her therapeutic work with Kathleen Pogue

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White she was to learn a terrible biographical truth Mum. A truth rooted in her birth mother's inability to do those daily negotiations of family – and other - racism that Frances Winddance Twine¹⁴ found some white mothers adopted as part of what she called an “anti-racist parenting strategy”. Anyway what she found out was that one day her birth mother put her in her pram and took her to the park and on the walk

two matrons who wanted to look at the sleeping baby in the stroller approached mother. They cooed and said, ‘what a cute little nigger baby’. The outcome was that, on that day or some other, as the baby slept in the stroller in the park, her mother abandoned her. [...] Marsha was rescued by the police, she was [...] beyond hunger [...] and became an inconsolable baby.¹⁵

This is beyond our experience isn't it Mum, far beyond and even though almost no-one who has lived it ever talks about it, it shows that you are not alone and that in our way we too know very well, don't we Mum, the violences skin differences can provoke.

But we also know that they can propel to the fore the love side of ambivalence. Like I mean, forgive me for darting back and forth across time, but do you remember that thing that happened to me? That time about a year after I had come back from Sri Lanka and Dai and I were living at home with you in the flat in Headstone Drive. This was about a year after Dai and I had married. God it was hard at that time wasn't it, Mum – you know the early/mid-70s – the racial atmosphere was thick and threatening like anything could happen anytime and round our area we started to see all that racist graffiti and KBW - *Keep Britain White* - slogans like in the 60s, daubed on walls. I was coming home from college I think, it was when I'd decided to try and get my 'A' levels, do you remember how amazing that decision was... but anyway. I was coming home from college and Dai was with me and suddenly I was on the ground, my leg collapsed from under me. At first I don't think I felt any pain, I was just astounded and then a burst of fire all along my right thigh just as I realised what had happened the moment before.

Kick, kick, kick.

“Nigger cunt” seeping like a frothy acid from the mouth of the white guy walking past me – obviously he didn't want me in ‘his space’.

We hid it from you for about a week. I was determined you were not to find out. Your fear and anguish was too much for me to bear – because I always found

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your terror of racial violence so hard Mum and I wanted to protect you. But of course you did see – and gasped and asked “what’s that...?” and I told you and you held me oh so tight and stroked my hair as you cried and I said “it’s alright Mum, it’s alright”. Oh, how much we know. And we can tell how those used to communicating through the skin’s social and emotional voice can love anyway – even in face of punishment and rejection and danger.

IV

Adhesions

You said that when you were in the ‘mother and baby’ home that single women were sent to in the 1950s when giving birth to ‘illegitimate’ children, that the Matron kept on at you to give me up for adoption. Begged you, is what you said. She said that you would then be free to get on with your life unhindered and that for you she would even bend the rules and let you meet the black man/white woman, married couple she had who wanted to adopt. He was a doctor she said and they were ‘well to do’ and it would give me a good home and start in life and free you..... You were tempted you said but couldn’t do it – were stuck to me.

Oh Mum how glad I am, how glad.

But Mum, I think the repetition of that story, along with the one about how much you loved Bill, about how you wouldn’t give him up for anybody or anything no matter what, I think I took those stories Mum and made them into my own ‘founding myth’. I mean I cocooned myself in the idea that I was a ‘love child’, created and born above the odds, the off-spring of a modern-day Heathcliffe and Cathy – there may have been no wild moors in Kilburn but the winds of passion and danger were all around. And in that cocoon I was safe Mum, or so I thought, from the power of your ambivalence. An ambivalence that I think I always *felt* but for so long could not *think* and my ‘myth of origin’ meant that I was always wholeheartedly and unambiguously wanted Mum. It was kind of like I used it has a narrativised “second skin”, to borrow a phrase from Esther Bick¹⁶ who is another psychoanalyst who has thought about skin and the role it plays in a mother/baby relationship. It was as though the ‘myth’ worked as a skin to hold me together – and you to me.

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But even with this myth, this repeated refrain – I was wanted, I was wanted, I was wanted - sometimes, sometimes, times that went on for a long time in fact – I fantasised that the doctor and his wife was David Pitt, who was to become Lord Pitt of Hampstead. Can you imagine... But Freud said:

Small events in the child's life which make him feel dissatisfied afford him provocation for beginning to criticize his parents, and for using, [...] the knowledge which he has acquired that other parents are in some respects preferable to them. [...] A feeling of being slighted is obviously what constitutes the subject-matter of such pro-vocations. There are only too many occasions [...] on which he feels he is not receiving the whole of his parents' love [and] his sense that his own affection is not being fully reciprocated then finds vent in the idea [...] of being a step-child or an adopted child¹⁷.

So maybe Mum, this is just normal stuff.

But I think there is more. Don't you think Mum. I already told you about France Winddance Twine, didn't I Mum and I mean compare what we know with another thing that she says on the basis of her study of white women raising what she calls "nonwhite" children whom they have birthed.

A nuanced analysis of contemporary racism and anti-racism must include the experiences of white parents of nonwhite children, particularly those mothers located in multi-ethnic families.

Transracial mothers, [i.e.] mothers who self-identify or are socially classified as members of a racial category that is presumed to be distinct from that of their birth children, can disrupt, hierarchies of inequality by challenging ideologies of white supremacy (and of racial differences)¹⁸

That's all true, isn't it Mum. But it's not all of it either, eh? I mean I was thinking about the six abortions you had between my birth and that of Lorraine's, six back

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street abortions the experience of which made you the strongest supporter of the law passed in the 1960s that made it legal. And we shared that Mum, didn't we, you know all that campaigning to prevent a change in the law, marching against the Corrie Bill and the other attempts to limit it or make it illegal again.

But maybe, too, those abortions were the symbol of how impossible you found it to have black children – to have me. Perhaps I was too much, too much to bear. And there was that terrible dream you had, do you remember? You were in a back room which you swore was our back room in Kilburn, the one you would retreat to after reading me Alice. And there was a foetus, almost fully formed and it was dancing around as though a puppet on a string and you were screaming. Then you woke up. And you wept that time too Mum, telling me it was a boy, your would-have-been son whose nearly fully-formed head was squashed under-foot by his would-have-been father, in front of your tear-filled eyes and ripped apart uterus. And you never had another abortion. But you did have Lorraine.

And for us – me – the one who *was* birthed, there was the time I came to meet you from work in Wembley. You were working at the chemist's then and it was a time when we were really poor and your and dad's relationship was nearly at rock bottom. How old was I then, was Lorraine born yet? I can't remember but in my mind I am about 11 or so, so she would have been. And of course I arrived too early and I waited for you and as usual I couldn't wait to see you (you were always surprised at that weren't you, remember that time you came back from the USA and I cried and held you tight at the airport and you said 'Look at you', and I was 21 then). But at Wembley I was about 11 – and though I can't remember it all, I do remember as if it were now, how you saw me, and froze a moment, went whiter than white and walked passed me without acknowledging me. It took me a while to understand what was going on – then in flash I realised. I wasn't to be seen. Your work colleagues didn't know you 'had black kids' and you denied me then and there. Me running a little behind, following you to the station. Spoken to only when you felt it safe to do so.

How did we survive that Mum, how did we? Did I massage your swollen feet when we got home? Did you say sorry? Was I expected to manage it like the time so many years later when you were in hospital for what turned out to be the last time?

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You know when you needed someone to go down the housing to sort out about the tenancy and I said “I’ll go tomorrow”. And I felt rather than heard what you said as, once again, you froze momentarily and said “maybe Nan should go”. And after a long pause, I heard you say “You understand, don’t you?”

I wanted to be sick Mum. I wanted to scream at you, that, no, I didn’t understand. That I wouldn’t collude with your racism and to ask you how could you do that to me – again. Instead, I said “well ok, but you’re being silly, it won’t make any difference” and rubbed your feet and held your head to try and stop it shaking because you loved me to do that – it helped lessen the trembling induced by the chemotherapy, the chemotherapy cocktail they said would be like a sledge-hammer battering your system. Oh Mum. And on the ward you were so proud of me - your oldest black daughter.

Birthing two times in a few minutes – once in racial difference, once in tenderness and care.

And that was the pattern wasn’t it Mum, I mean we danced sameness and difference all the time didn’t we, navigating the external and internal landscapes of racial difference right up to the moment when I watched you exhale your last breath on Annie Zunz Ward in St. Bartholomew’s hospital. I live there now Mum, well right by and sometimes when I want to be near you I go and sit in the yard of the hospital, under the trees, and I look up at what I still think of as your window. And I see your face and hear your voice, singing with Sarah.



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I was asked Mum, by a man in the USA why I played Archie Shepp when I was talking with/about you. What could I say Mum – that we loved him, that music was always with us, that it reflected our trials, induced our changes, spoke our possibilities. All I said was that we loved him. And there's this new woman now Mum called Madeleine Peyroux and she wants to be Billy but can't be – who could? - but she's not bad and when she sings Leonard Cohen's *Dance me to the End of Love* I remember that you taught me the pain of race, the joy of dancing, the meaning of love, ----- and an acute awareness of just what has to be faced – socially, collectively and personally – in the pursuit of social, political *and psychic* change.

I love you Mum.

All the things we say.

All the things we say.

Discography

Big Bill Broonzy (1951) 'Black, Brown and White', re-issued on *Black, Brown and Beige: Skin Colors and the Blues*, (2007) Saga Blues, Vogue 5IV4100

James Brown (1968) 'Say it Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud', re-issued on *Stand Up and be Counted*, (1999) HurtCD 020, Harmless Recordings

Judy Mowatt (1988) 'Black Woman', on *Black Woman*, Shanachie 43011

Archie Shepp (1969) 'Blasé', on *Blasé*, Byg Records, re-issued (2002) by Sarabandas, Giants of Jazz, 53375 ADD

Nina Simone (1959) 'Fine and Mellow', on *Nina Simone at the Town Hall*, Colpix Records

Nina Simone (1978) 'My Father', on *Baltimore*, CTI Records, re-issued (1995) Sony, Epic 476906 2

Nina Simone (1968) 'Turning Point', on *Silk and Soul*, RCA, re-issued (1999) Camden Deluxe, BMG 74321 698812

Sarah Vaughan (1954) 'Embraceable You', re-issued (1990) on *Sarah Vaughan with Clifford Brown*, Polygram Records, EmArcy MG 36004

¹ Thanks are due to all those who have offered supportive, thoughtful and insightful comments after hearing me present this paper at Lancaster, Syracuse and Cornell universities; the Psychoanalysis and History seminar held at the Institute of Historical Research in London and at one of the MaMSIE events, and at the Future of Minority Studies Conference held at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia.

² Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Walker Books, 1865/2001), p. 204-207.

³ Wilfred Bion, *Learning from Experience* (London: Karnac, 1961).

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⁴ Major General Arthur Arnold, (1942) 'Notes on Relations with Coloured Troops', reprinted in full in *West Indian Women at War: British Racism in World War II*, Ben Bousquet and Colin Douglas (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1991), p.175-177.

⁵ Thomas Carlyle 'Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question', *Fraser's Magazine* 40, (December 1849), republished as 'Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question'. *Fraser's Magazine* (1853). Catherine Hall has argued that the change in title reflected a radical change in the atmosphere in England in regard to public discourse about racial difference and that by the 1850s there had been a marked demise in an ideology of 'the family of man' and a corresponding rise in an ideology which postulated immutable difference among human populations. See her *Civilising Subjects: metropole and colony in the English imagination 1830-1867* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

⁶ Didier Anzieu *The Skin Ego* (London: Yale, 1989), p. 99, 103 and 105.

⁷ Hansard, 25 November – 6 December 1963, cols 438-44, London, HMSO.

⁸ Rozsika Parker *Torn in Two: the experience of maternal ambivalence* (London: Virago, 1995), p.15.

⁹ This is the terminology that was prevalent in the period between the 1950s and at least the late 1970s. Such children were often deemed objects of pity as it was commonly thought that they would be split between mutually exclusive cultures and have no sense of belonging to either. A presumed fate that later was thought to be the property of the British born children of south Asian migrants, especially the young women. By the 1980s the term 'half-caste' to refer to children born to a white and a black parent was being replaced by the terms 'mixed-parentage' or 'mixed-heritage'. None of these terms has provided a language for my own self-naming as I name myself as black with a white mother.

¹⁰ Barack Obama 'Race Speech', (18/03/2008). <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0308/9100.html>

¹¹ Kathleen Pogue White, 'Surviving Hating and Being Hated', *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, vol.38(3), (2002), pp.401-422.

¹² Ibid, p.402-3 and p. 420-421. She thinks this taboo on speaking hatreds even operates in the world of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. A situation she thinks urgently needs to be changed.

¹³ Ibid, p.407.

¹⁴ France Winddance Twine, 'Managing Everyday Racisms: The Anti-Racist Practices of White Mothers of African-Descent Children in Britain', in *Everyday Inequalities: critical Inquiries* ed. by Jodi O'Brien and Judith A. Howard (MA: Blackwell, 1998).

¹⁵ Ibid, p.408.

¹⁶ Esther Bick, 'The Experience of the Skin in Early Object Relations', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 49 (1968). Reprinted in *Surviving Space: papers on infant observation*, ed. by Andrew Briggs (London: Karnac, 2002), pp.55-59.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, 'Family Romances' (1908) in *Standard Edition*, vol IX, (London: Vintage, 2001) p.237-238.

¹⁸ France Winddance Twine, 'Managing Everyday Racisms: The Anti-Racist Practices of White Mothers of African-Descent Children in Britain', p.238.

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